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## Smurfit-Stone: Frenchtown mill site is clean, safe for development

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By ROB CHANEY of the Missoulian missoulian.com | Posted: Saturday, March 12, 2011 6:00 am | (16) Comments

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"When we discontinued operations at the Missoula mill more than a year ago, we developed a detailed strategy for removing all residual process materials subject to environmental regulation," company spokeswoman Lisa Esneault wrote in an e-mail to the Missoulian. "We discussed our plans with the (Montana Department of Environmental Quality) at that time and have since implemented all activities as promised. This work is now complete and we believe all environmental issues at the mill have been appropriately addressed."

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"When we discontinued operations at the Missoula mill more than a year ago, we developed a detailed strategy for removing all residual process materials subject to environmental regulation," company spokeswoman Lisa Esneault wrote in an e-mail to the Missoulian. "We discussed our plans with the (Montana Department of Environmental Quality) at that time and have since implemented all activities as promised. This work is now complete and we believe all environmental issues at the mill have been appropriately addressed."

Smurfit-Stone Container confirmed plans to sell the mill to Portland, Ore.-based Ralston Investments on Feb. 25. In the letter, Esneault said the buyer is talking with a third party interested in purchasing the mill's power equipment and setting up a biomass-fueled electricity cogeneration plant.

The rest of the facility will be sold for scrap, as the sale agreement includes a prohibition on all future papermaking in Frenchtown.

Numerous attempts by the Missoulian to reach Ralston Investments owner Tim Ralston for comment have failed.

Missoula Area Economic Development Corp. director Dick King said Friday he couldn't comment on negotiations with possible energy buyers. But he did say the situation is positive.

"We're very encouraged there may be a viable alternative that would put people to work," King said. "We've supplied information to several potential buyers about programs that could be made available for the right project."

Those programs include state and federal loan guarantees that could reduce interest costs for an energy development project, state workforce training money and county property tax reductions. All of those are tied to how many jobs would be created at the new site.

King said a power-generation facility could bring 40 or 50 jobs back to the site, while a pulp production operation might mean 200 or 300 employees.

"Once you restore the flow of fiber, there's a lot of wood waiting to be delivered," King said. "When Smurfit closed, there were 417 direct jobs on the inside and 1,500 indirect jobs lost. It's really gotten through to people what that facility was for economic activity across much of Montana."

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Esneault's letter also responded to requests from DEQ director Richard Opper to voluntarily do an assessment of the property for possible environmental hazards. On Friday, Opper said those conversations are getting under way.

"The company is generally pretty cooperative about this, but I'm not sure I buy that last line," Opper said of Esneault's claim that all environmental issues have been appropriately addressed. "They were a responsible company and I don't accuse them of acting in bad faith at all. But this is a 50-year-old industrial site that's been abandoned and hasn't been under the same ownership all that time."

Opper said while Smurfit-Stone Container had been exemplary in handling its water-discharge incidents and other problems, former mill owner Champion International was "public enemy No. 1 because of their air-quality problems in the old days."

And in its first decades of operation by Hoerner-Waldorf Corp., the paper plant was allowed to landfill its own waste on the property without supervision.

The mill has about 67 acres of sludge ponds that collected hazardous materials before the wastewater went to the settling ponds. There's a risk those ponds could contain PCBs, dioxin and other toxic compounds frequently found in industrial sites. Opper said his agency is also concerned about possible asbestos in the mill's manufacturing equipment.

"We can't stop a sale of the company, but before a sale occurs we'd like to see this work done," Opper said. "A new buyer may be inheriting an unknown amount of liability."

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That would not be something new for Tim Ralston. His company also bought a defunct Abitibi-Consolidated paper mill in Steilacoom, Wash., in 2010 and has been slowly upgrading the property.

"There've been some lingering things that he's been responsible for, mainly involving the railroad track," said Marv Coleman, Abitibi site manager for the Washington Department of Ecology. "Paper mills can be kind of complex when it comes to environmental problems."

Coleman said Ralston had been cooperative with state agencies on cleaning the 53-acre site.

"He doesn't seem to be in a big hurry," Coleman said. "He's started demolition of the plant, and I think they envisioned putting a residential development there. It's a prime place, right on Chambers Bay where it empties into Puget Sound."

Abitibi did extensive remediation before selling the mill, including cleaning gasoline contamination in the soils and groundwater. The mill produced newsprint, which Coleman described as a relatively simple product compared to the linerboard that Frenchtown made.

"One thing we're always concerned about with paper mills is you always have the specter of dioxin," Coleman said. "As he (Ralston) goes through demolition, getting rid of buildings, it's not beyond possibility he'd mn into something nobody knew about."

In December, the Steilacoom School District bought 13.5 acres of the Washington site from Ralston for \$1.85 million. The district plans to expand its high school campus there.

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In Frenchtown, "the buyer has also indicated that they intend to convert the pond areas at the site to farmland," Smurfit's Esneault said. More than 600 acres of the 3,200-acre mill property were used as wastewater settling ponds for the mill's papermaking processes.

The bulk of Smurfit-Stone Container's Frenchtown property is already in farm production. While there are hazardous waste concerns about the mill's smaller sludge and aeration ponds, former mill environmental supervisor Larry Weeks said the larger settling ponds should be benign.

"There was very little material that dropped out of the wastewater once it got to the ponds next to the river," Weeks said. "The material that was in most of the ponds was a thin layer of fibrous material. When the ponds dried out, it looked like wrinkled pieces of cardboard. I don't see a problem with sediment with most of those ponds there."

It's possible those ponds could be a farmer's dream. Smurfit-Stone Container was part of the regional Voluntary Nutrient Reduction Program, a multiparty agreement to control pollution in the Clark Fork River.

The paper mill's main threat was the release of nitrogen and phosphorus compounds in the water, which would act as fertilizer for algae growth.

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